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Ruthie

● Olivia Murray Nichols

Ruthie Conway had some strange notions at times, but she had no call to act the way she did about Saralee. When her pa, Alvin, married Saralee Wilkins, everybody in Pioneer's Draw agreed it was the best thing he could do for his three young 'uns.

Saralee wasn't really an old maid, but she was getting close. Her ma had been a cantankerous old soul, often ailing, always whining. When other girls were marrying and having families of their own, Saralee was too busy nursing and humoring her ma and helping to bring up her two little brothers. By the time the first boy married and their ma died and the other boy moved to the city to work in the shoe factory, there weren't any young men in the Draw, or even that whole end of the county, to come calling on Saralee.

And then, one July, Rose Conway died, leaving Alvin with three young 'uns, one of them a newborn babe.

Alvin, thin and weary from grief, had no time for proper courting. One evening, a week after the funeral, he knocked at Saralee's door.

Saralee looked into his bewildered eyes, faded blue, like his overalls. "Come in, take a chair. I've a jug of tea already cold. I'll get you a glass."

"No'm, I don't care for tea, thank you," he said, sitting in the rocker she offered. "I just want to talk with you."

Saralee turned a cane-bottomed chair to face him and sat down too.

Alvin's rough, red hands twisted his work hat. He wet his lips. "I don't rightly know where to turn," he said, almost in a whisper. "Joel and Ruthie, they're big kids now, and not much trouble to a body, but they need a woman's care, same as the least one does."

Saralee didn't say anything, but she noticed his rough-dried shirt with a button missing, and thought He needs a woman's care himself.

"My place is a good one," Alvin went on, louder, "though I've got considerable debts from Rose being sick and — and all. But the crops look good."

He stopped fiddling with his hat, took a deep breath, and looked her full in the face. "Saralee, will you marry me?"

Saralee's face flushed. She had known Alvin, as she knew most of the people in the Draw, all her life. She liked him, and she knew he had been a good husband to Rose.

Alvin stood up, curling his hat brim. "I reckon I ought to let you think on it."

"Oh, no!" Saralee stood too. She touched his arm. "Rose Conway was my friend. I'd be real proud, Alvin, to care for her family like my own."

Brother Johnson married them the next Sunday, right after preaching services.

A wedding coming so soon after a funeral like that may have been sad anywhere but in the Draw, but where folks grow up together, farm and sew together, they sort of weep and rejoice together too. So now they rejoiced that Alvin found a ma for his

young 'uns again and that Saralee got a man before it was too late. And of course they did the same sort of celebrating they would over any wedding — took in dinner and hung around awhile for the same kind of loud talk and jokes, snickering and whispering.

"You taking on a ready-made family, eh, Saralee? Mind now, you'll have your own 'fore long!"

"Alvin's right smart — getting him a wife that's had plenty of practice making biscuits!"

Even old Seth Hodges joined in to whistle a warning through his toothless gums: "You watch her now, Alvin. See she don't do like Jed Hagler's woman. The one who lived with him long enough to pack up his first wife's pretties, then move off to Memphis!"

Alvin and Saralee took the joshing good-naturedly. Folks in the Draw didn't mean any harm, and they knew it.

No one figured Saralee would have trouble with the young 'uns right off.

Oh, she and Joel hit it off just fine. She was used to boy ways, having brothers and all. Joel was a scrawny bit of a lad, for all he could mark the hogs and run a tractor on his pa's bottomland farm. He wasn't but twelve, with cotton hair that wouldn't slick back no matter what kind of grease he combed into it. His face was splotchy with freckles, and he was shy as a rabbit, but Saralee could patch a shirt so his pa never knew it had caught on the cow-pen fence, and she made tea cakes enough to fill even his ever-hungry stomach; so Joel didn't give her a minute's bother.

Things were different with Ruthie. For one thing, no one ever knew what was going on in Ruthie's head. She had a kind of Indian look — dark eyes peering solemnly out from under her straight black bangs. She never was a laughing child, even before her ma died, but now she was just plain sullen and broody.

Saralee tried every way she knew to make friends with Ruthie, but whatever she did seemed to go wrong. Take that business about little Al. A body would think any girl of ten would get tired of tending a baby all the time, but not Ruthie. She even kept his crib beside her bed so that she could look after him in the night.

That first morning Saralee was there, after the breakfast things were cleared away, she drew water in the white wash pan and set it on the kitchen table. She went to the crib and was bending over the baby, unpinning his diaper, when Ruthie slipped up behind her.

"What are you doing?"

"Why, I'm getting little Al ready for his bath."

Quick as wildfire, Ruthie snatched up the baby. "I'll bathe him."

Saralee straightened up, still holding a pin. "That's right sweet of you to want to help, Ruthie honey, but you don't have to. Run out and play till time to get dinner and —"

"*I'll* do it," Ruthie said, her black eyes snapping. "I've done for little Al since the day he was born and I aim to keep right on doing for him!"

Saralee wasn't one to make a fuss, and maybe she figured Ruthie would go back to her playing in time, so she let her have her way.

After they had that to-do about names, Ruthie never outright sassed Saralee again, but she didn't go out of her way to be pleasant either. That happened the first evening Saralee and Alvin were married, after all the

company had gone home. The baby was in bed, but the others were in the sitting room, and Joel asked his pa what he should call Saralee.

Alvin took his pipe out of his mouth and studied a bit. "Well, *Ma*, I reckon."

Neither young 'un said anything, so Saralee spoke up. "That won't be easy to the big ones, Alvin. The least one, now, I'd be proud to have him call me Ma. But these two have called me Saralee all their lives, and they can keep on calling me that if they'd rather."

Joel grinned timidly at her, not being one to say much, but Ruthie piped up, prissy-like, "Saralee's a funny name. Sounds like a horse feed."

"Ruthie!" Alvin slapped the bowl of his pipe in his hand and stood up to reach for the flyswat.

Saralee stopped him with a laugh. "No one's said that since I was in grade school," she said. "Kids used to call me 'Celery' just to get my goat. I'd almost forgotten it."

"Just the same," warned Alvin, "Ruthie's got no call to —"

Saralee interrupted him. "Rose is a real pretty name," she said softly. "It's reasonable Ruthie would like her ma's name, and it being a flower too. Now, *Saralee* is plain, but it's from the Bible, same as *Ruth* and *Joel*."

"Where is *Saralee* in the Bible?" Ruthie wanted to know.

"Not really *Saralee*. But *Sarah*. That's where my ma got my name, from Abraham's wife. She added *lee* from her side of the family. So you and Joel and me all have Bible names."

Joel's freckles brightened, to show his pleasure, and Ruthie said nothing more.

Even the new bed didn't soften Ruthie towards Saralee.

The Conway house was not much different from most in the Draw, though it stood apart from town on the edge of a pine thicket. It had three rooms, sitting room, bedroom, and kitchen. The sitting room was the biggest. In it were two cane-bottomed chairs, a rocker with a cretonne cushion, an old trunk with a crocheted scarf, a lamp and some school books on top of it, and a double bed with a headboard carved out of solid walnut. That was where Alvin and Saralee slept. The young 'uns slept in the bedroom, the bigger ones in the double bed, with the baby's crib pulled up to Ruthie's side.

Saralee didn't bring much with her when she moved to the Conway house besides her clothes and some pieces of her ma's dishes. Her married brother and his wife lived in the old home place, and Saralee wouldn't take things they could use when Rose Conway had left enough cooking vessels and quilts and all for a family to get along with.

But one morning while Saralee and Ruthie were making the beds — Ruthie was a good hand to help with the chores, if she was so sullen about them — Saralee asked, "Ruthie honey, how would you like a bed of your own?"

"All right, I reckon."

"Well, there's my bed at home. It's just a single bed, more like a cot, but no one's using it. You and Joel are getting big enough for your own beds now, and if you're going to keep care of little Al at night, it might be best to be by yourself anyway."

"Yes'm, I'll keep care of the baby" was all Ruthie said.

Saralee sent Alvin and Joel for the bed when they came in from the field that evening. There was plenty of room for it, even with the other bed and crib, the dresser and closet curtained off of one corner. It was a pretty little bed, with a white painted iron stead. Saralee promised to help Ruthie piece a coverlet for it. Ruthie did say thank you, but not much else.

When school started, of course, Saralee took over the baby tending in the daytime. The first day, Ruthie came racing home after school like she'd been gone a month instead of a day. Saralee was in the yard, taking clothes from the line.

"Hey, Ruthie!" she greeted. "You hungry for tea cakes and milk?"

Without answering, Ruthie ran past her and into the house. In a minute she came out, cuddling little Al close to her chin.

"I do declare," Saralee laughed, "you look like you expected him to of flown away, and him too little to walk, even."

Ruthie crooned to the baby. The wild look had gone out of her face.

"There's plenty of tea cakes in the tin," Saralee repeated. "Save some for Joel."

"Yes'm. I reckon they'd taste good about now."

Saralee never had been one to hold her hands, and there was plenty to keep her busy around the Conway house. She kept the house scrubbed and shining and the feed-sack curtains starched and ruffly. She put up jars of vegetables from the late garden and fruit too, and she set a good table. They always had meat of some kind and greens and hot bread at the night meal, and the young 'uns took full lunch pails to school. The baby was a play-pretty to Saralee, now that Ruthie was away in the daytime.

Winter came late to the Draw, and after Saralee let down hems in Ruthie's school dresses and moved buttons over on Joel's shirts, her sewing chores were done for a while. But one evening while she and Alvin were talking after supper, she asked him about the trunk in the sitting room.

"It's full of winter clothes and bedding, as I remember," he said.

"I know. I looked through it. There's Rose's coat and a plaid wool skirt there. A real full skirt. I wondered if —"

"Take 'em and welcome, though Rose was some bigger than you. You'll have to cut 'em down."

Saralee nodded. "Sister Johnson said I could use her machine. I thought I'd —"

Ruthie had been dressing little Al for bed. She came to the bedroom door frowning. "Pa!"

Alvin frowned back at her.

Joel, studying at the kitchen table, looked up, big-eyed.

"Mama's coat —" Ruthie began.

"Sister!" Alvin wasn't a man easily riled. Ruthie hushed.

Saralee went to her. "Ruthie honey, I just want—"

Ruthie twisted away from her touch and flung herself on the little bed.

"Take the clothes," Alvin told Saralee, "and don't pay her any mind."

Joel came in quietly. "I reckon Mama'd give 'em to you," he said shyly.

"Oh, Joel!" Saralee cried, holding him in her arms, but she didn't say any more.

About Halloween time every year, folks in the Draw got together for the Frolic. They met at the church house early in the evening, where

the preacher returned thanks, and then they went next door to the schoolhouse gymnasium, where they spread their supper and had a general good time.

Saralee dressed and fried two chickens, candied a big bowl of sweet potatoes, and made a couple of pies from berries she had put up in the summer. Ruthie dressed herself and little Al, and when Joel and Alvin finished their chores and cleaned up, the Conways set out for the Frolic.

"Here come the newlyweds with the big family," someone called, and Saralee and Alvin waved a friendly greeting. Then Saralee joined the ladies who were spreading food on the long tables made of planks across sawhorses, and Alvin wandered off to find the men around the coffee pot. Joel was "it" in a game of tag as he came in the door, and Ruthie, holding little Al like a doll, joined a circle of squealing girls.

There was plenty of food and to spare at the Frolic. After supper, the young 'uns played more games or told ghost stories in the churchyard. The men, those who did not go outside for a smoke, stood to one side of the gym and talked farming or hunting. The women, after bedding down their babies on pallets along the walls, huddled in a corner to exchange gossip and recipes.

Someone brought a fiddle so the young folks could dance. Courting couples paired off and older folks joshed them. Saralee and Alvin were still the newest bride and groom in the Draw and got their share of fun poked at them, but they could tease back too, keeping up the laughing and the merrymaking.

It was near ten o'clock before things quieted down and women began to collect their dishes and tablecloths. Saralee packed her basket and went across the room to gather up little Al, pallet and all. Ruthie followed her.

Mrs. Applegate hoisted her fat sleeping baby girl on a bench to change her. "Saralee," she muttered through a mouthful of safety pins, "you mind what I said. Get you some of that salve and use it regular. Keeps the skin from cracking when it stretches." Saralee turned red and looked at Ruthie, but Ruthie was busy tucking a coverlet around little Al.

"I don't expect any trouble," Saralee said. "But thanks for your advice."

She and Ruthie found Alvin with a group of men. "If you'll call Joel, we'd best be going."

Alvin nodded and turned to go. Seth Hodges caught at his arm. Seth always could find something besides sweet cider to drink at the Frolic.

"Well, Alvin," he smacked, "she's still here, eh? Ain't run off to Memphis with all your pretties?"

"Not yet," Alvin grinned.

"Well, you recall that Jed Hagler's woman—"

Ruthie tugged at her pa's other arm. "It's getting late for the baby, Pa."

Alvin patted the top of her head. "All right, sister. Joel's playing hide-and-seek. We can call him on our way out."

Some folks had already gone, but there were still plenty to say good night to. The preacher and his wife stood near the door.

"Evening, Brother Johnson," Alvin nodded. "Best Frolic yet."'

"Oh, Saralee." Sister Johnson stepped over and talked close to her ear. "You want to bring the young 'uns over to try on the you-know-

what before you do the hems?"

"Do you care, this late?" Saralee asked. "It sure would be easier than bringing them back on Saturday. Alvin, will you wait here a minute? Ruthie, you come with me. That's all right, bring little Al."

The preacher's house was on the other side of the church. Saralee called Joel to come along too.

Sister Johnson opened the door and turned on the front room light. She led them into the bedroom where she kept her sewing machine.

"I didn't know if you aimed to surprise them or not," she apologized.

"I'd best try to fit them," Saralee said. "I'm not so sure about girl things."

Sister Johnson opened a cedar wardrobe and took out two hangers.

Ruthie gasped. "Mama's clothes!" There was her ma's coat, cut down to her size, and the old plaid skirt ripped up and made into a jacket lined with outing flannel for Joel.

"You were getting awful leggy for your old coat," Saralee explained, "and I figured your mama's would do you better. Try it on, for I'm not too sure of the sleeves."

Ruthie laid the sleeping baby on the bed and slipped on the coat. She rubbed her chin softly against the wide shawl collar, and for a minute those solemn eyes of hers looked watery. She rubbed her nose and let Sister Johnson pin up a cuff on the sleeve.

"Plenty of turn-up here," Sister Johnson said. "You did right well, Saralee, with your first girl sewing."

Joel's jacket was all finished but the buttonholes, and it fit fine. It was a brown plaid with a streak of orange that matched his freckles. He grinned at Saralee.

"I didn't care what you did with Mama's things, but if I'd of known, I'd of said I didn't want no *skirt!*"

Saralee laughed. "Do you care now? Your old jacket was all out at the elbows and no way to patch it."

"No'm, I don't care. It sure don't look like a woman's skirt now!"

Sister Johnson put the coats back on their hangers.

"I can finish them up next week," Saralee said. "The wind's getting sharp of a morning and they're likely to need them soon."

"Besides," Sister Johnson twisted her face in a wink, "you're probably anxious to get on to other stitching."

Ruthie picked up little Al. But she looked back over her shoulder at that cedar wardrobe before they left.

Everyone was in bed and asleep when Saralee heard Ruthie throw up. Saralee jumped up and ran to the kitchen for a washrag and vessel of water. In the bedroom she shoved the crib out of the way and sat down beside Ruthie to bathe her face. Ruthie threw up again, then fell back against the pillow, white and tired.

"You all right, honey?" Saralee asked.

Ruthie nodded.

"I reckon you had too much Frolic pie. I lost count of the times you and Joel went to that dessert table. I reckon your own ma'd of known when you had enough and stopped you."

Ruthie shook her head. "I got sick last year too."

"Joel too?" Saralee frowned anxiously at him, but he slept soundly.

"No'm. Just me."

She had lost what was bothering her; she said she didn't feel sick any more. Saralee told her to keep the cold cloth on her head; then she went for more rags and water to clean the floor.

She mopped and gagged, mopped and gagged. Ruthie watched a while, then climbed out of bed to help.

"Get back, honey," Saralee begged. "I'll be all right." But Ruthie scrubbed with her. When they finished, Saralee took the rags and tossed them out the back door.

"I'll burn them tomorrow," she said. She sat down beside Ruthie again, weak and pale herself now. "You want me to stay here with you awhile?"

"No'm. I mean, yes'm." Ruthie looked scared, sort of. She wet her lips. "Saralee," she said, finally, "are you going to have a little 'un?"

Saralee nodded. "In the springtime."

"I reckon you'll want this here bed back then, for your own little 'un."

"No. Oh, no," Saralee said quickly. "I gave *you* that bed. We'll get your pa to rig up another crib for the new one. Little Al won't even be out of his that soon."

Ruthie's dark eyes looked bigger than ever in her white face against the white pillowslip. "Then if you have a little 'un, you won't be leaving us?"

"Leaving you, honey? Why no, I never—"

"You won't go away with Mama's things," she glanced at little Al, "like that woman Seth Hodges knows?"

"Seth Hodges? Oh, Ruthie honey!" Saralee moved the wet cloth and brushed at Ruthie's bangs. "Have you been scared of that? That happened years ago, back when Seth was a boy and still had his teeth. No one in the Draw would remember it if he didn't josh about it all the time. No, honey, I won't go away. Your mama was my friend. I love the things she had, but I'm content to keep them all here at home."

She bent over and kissed Ruthie on the forehead. "If you're feeling better now, maybe we'd best go to sleep."

Saralee had crawled back in bed and was warming her feet against Alvin's when she felt Ruthie tap her on the shoulder. She rolled over and sat up.

"I been thinking," Ruthie whispered. "Maybe tomorrow we ought to move little Al's crib in here with you, so you'll be used to babies when your little 'un comes."

Saralee squeezed Ruthie's hand. "I reckon you're right," she said.

Lament

• **Carolyn Bowes**

Of summer coins, I've salvaged not a one,
Spent them on trifles, given them away;
Dreamed vacantly through many more than some,
Lost those in laughter, squandered these in play.
Today in Winter's World I but regret
Not having gone twice several days in debt.

The Gun of Cain

• Ruth Chessman

When Heck Balliol shot his cousin Dave he was also shooting his foster brother — Burt Balliol had adopted Heck when he was two. Dave and Heck had grown up close enough in age to be twins, but with little love between them. Maybe if there'd been a woman in the family — but Burt's wife had died in the same flood that had taken both of Heck's parents, so there was no feminine softening in their lives.

Then one June afternoon when they were both fifteen, Heck shot Dave. The noise brought his uncle running from the barn. For a second, the man stood in the doorway of the kitchen, filling it the long way but with plenty of space at the sides. He was gaping, not believing, as he stared at his son on the floor. Dave was still alive, all right, but unconscious. The blood welled out of the belly wound in little spurts, one spurt for each heartbeat. His hair, the yellow Balliol hair, lay spread a little like a fan or a halo, and rage pushed the guilty fright out of Heck because he realized that even now, half dead as Dave was, he could still manage to look like an angel.

Burt sprang to the phone and ground the handle savagely, yelling to Carrie Jones, the operator, to fetch a doctor quick. Then he ran back to kneel by his son. You could see him yearning to lift the boy, to hold him up, to hold him close as if the holding might save his life, and you could see him fight for control to keep from moving him for fear of making the bad damage worse. He kept smoothing the light hair back from Dave's forehead, even though there was no need, just smoothing and smoothing, and all of a sudden he jerked out in low tones, without looking up, "You done it with the forty-four."

Heck's eyes swerved for a moment to look at the heavy gun on the floor, then he looked back at his uncle.

"All right," he said. "So I used your crummy forty-four. But I didn't know it was loaded, and neither did he. Besides, it wouldn't have gone off even so, if he did right. But no, it was grab, grab, grab with him all the time; so he grabbed once too often."

Burt still didn't look up. "You're speaking of your brother," he said.

"No brother of mine," Heck said, but not out loud. He couldn't bear to hurt his uncle any more than he was already hurt. He kept his eyes on Dave now, watching the blood come out in those steady spurts and knowing that when the blood didn't come any more, Dave would be dead. And knowing too that when everything stopped, he still wouldn't be able to make himself feel sorry.

The blood was still pumping out when they heard the doctor's rattletrap car stop in front of the hen yard.

"I'll stick by you," Burt said as he got up and opened the door. His eyes went to the boy on the floor once again. "You didn't know it was loaded, after all."

The doctor, who was a drunken

old has-been, but better in his cups than most might be cold sober, remarked in alcohol-slurred syllables as he worked, "It'll be nip and tuck for a while with Dave here. So Hector didn't know the gun was loaded, hey?" His liquefied voice went on magniloquently. "We can't go into the subterranean motives that may direct these — accidents. Actually, brother against brother may want to kill, but if it appears to be an accident, we must call it so."

It was so called.

Dave was carried by ambulance to the hospital in Carver forty miles away, where sober doctors complemented the hasty patching job and went on from there, operating three times in six weeks, until at last they could say that by Christmas, with luck, Dave would be able to go home as good as new.

That left Heck the only son at home. The farm, sown long on potatoes this year, took a lot of cultivation. They missed Dave, the work they could have got out of him, anyway, Heck amended. He didn't miss his brother-cousin at all, except for that. He wondered if his uncle did. Never a word was said in that womanless household about Dave, even on Sundays, when Burt drove off for the day to see his son. Heck used to think a lot, remembering cruelty after cruelty Dave had practiced, subtleties that a smarter and older person than Heck would have failed to pin down. The lumpier side of the bed, the faint look of derision when someone called Heck, "Burt's boy," the emphasis on "my farm," "my father."

He'd think of it as he chopped hard, cultivating. Once he straightened up with the anger of it to stare full into the face of his uncle. Burt had been watching him — hating him, maybe. He must have been thinking of Dave. Could he be wishing it had turned out the other way round? Could he be wishing that if the gun had to go off at all, it might have sent its bullet into the stranger? Then the father could have gone on adoring his only son. He wouldn't have missed me at all, Heck thought dismally. That's the way it's always been, nothing new about it. It's the way it should have been. I don't hold a thing against him for that, he thought.

But they hadn't ought to have hated me because I was the better boy.

He bent over again, digging hard at a hill. I took from my mother on that, he went on resentfully. She taught school, she was somebody. Why can't they let it go at that? But no, Burt had to make out Dave had the same brains, and Dave had to do things to make out he was better than equal. I never tried to make out I was the same bigness as Dave, nor as strong. There they were, the two of them, hating me for not being an ornery zero with no sense, no strength, no nothing.

Just about the time he had worked up a good hate against them both, he had a sudden memory of that fool doctor's words, and sickening guilt rode over him like the dry heat of an August wind. All right. He probably had wanted to really kill Dave, so he had no right to hide behind *I didn't know it was loaded.* He got so weak with the truth of it that he had to drop to his knees, pretending he had to claw at a stubborn weed clump. How many accidents hid the truth that way, even from the fellow that was the most at fault? How many times did brother shoot brother,

meaning to, in accidents that happened only because a hate lay sleepless and waiting?

He sprang to his feet and tore across the rows to his uncle. "You holding it against me?" he asked gratingly.

His uncle leaned on the hoe handle and squinted off to where the sun hung low against the pines. "No," he said.

"You're lying," said Heck. "You been lying since you took me in. You can't admit to yourself that you hate me because I was smarter than your own blood son."

Burt didn't say anything, and all of a sudden Heck couldn't go on. Truth was, he couldn't hate his uncle for it. He could blame Dave, all right, because Dave was mean and lying, but his uncle had to act the way he did because it was in nature to want your son to be the best. The man and the boy fell back to work without another word, but now as he chopped away at the hills, Heck kept wanting to run off, to China or any place where he wouldn't need to look into his uncle's eyes again.

The summer melted into fall, and each minute that passed cemented another brick into the wall growing between them, a wall made of silence and hate and loneliness. Heck went back to school, feeling a little strange about taking the two-mile walk alone for the first time in his life. When September ended, Burt bought him a sheepskin jacket against the winter and said, "Dave figured to have one, too."

Heck put on the jacket and said, "Thanks, Uncle," but he wouldn't talk about Dave.

Burt went on calmly, "I believe I'll buy him one anyway, even though most of the winter'll be gone afore he gets the use of it."

There was a question in his voice, the plea of a lonely man who will gratefully let bygones be bygones in exchange for a little talk. But Heck would not agree nor disagree nor say a word. He would not talk about Dave.

In October there was a light fall of snow. It drifted down while he sat in school, watching it, and he couldn't wait to get home. He wanted to go out after rabbits.

"No guns for you," Burt said flatly, but it wasn't a refusal; it was more like an accusation. The shooting of Dave Balliol will never be forgotten in this house, Heck thought. He waited until Burt went out with an axe, heading for the elm that had come down in the September northeaster; then he took the .22 gauge rifle off the kitchen wall. Out in the field, he looked behind him once at the tracks of his boots, getting on for man-size now. That's a clear enough trail for any man, he thought. Let Uncle see I'm not afraid of him, or of anyone else, not even my conscience. It was an accident I shot Dave; even that crazy old soak of a doctor said so. It's no reason I can't shoot a couple of rabbits. If Uncle wants to get mad because I took his stinking twenty-two let him, that's all.

He saw a couple of deer, but he kept scrupulously to rabbit. He got one, first shot out of the barrel, and slung it from the belt of his sheepskin coat. He was aiming at the second, when from the corner of his eye he saw the tall, still form of his uncle.

Heck lowered the gun and turned to face him.

"All right," he said, "here's your gun. I didn't do any harm."

Burt walked over, not hurrying, and took the gun.

"Not this time, you didn't," he said. "But you done harm once, and you might do it again lessen you learn better. Which I'm going to learn you."

Heck stood his ground. "You and who else?" he asked.

His uncle kept walking closer, slow and easy. "Me," he said. "I'm no drunken doctor. I ain't agoin' to pat your curly yeller head and tell you, you didn't know it was loaded. By God, if that smart head you're so proud of didn't know it, there was some part of you did, and that's the part I'm going to pay off now."

He reached across a couple of feet and slapped Heck in the face. Heck didn't move. Burt slapped him again, then dropped the gun, and slapped him hard a third time. Without planning it, Heck's hand flashed up and gave it back to his uncle.

"Long's we're paying back," he said, "that one's for hating me because I bested your boy."

He struck farther than his hand could reach with that one. For a long time his uncle stood still, wave after wave of red coloring his face. Then he struck at Heck again, but this time it was crack! not slap, because he had closed his hand into a fist.

Heck began to fight back.

It went on for a long time, with Heck getting the worst of it but coming back each time. Each time, it seemed, he couldn't get to his feet again. And then, finally, he really couldn't, and he s t a y e d on the churned-up snow, breathing sobs.

"Nuf?" his uncle gasped. Heck couldn't say the word, just reached out beseechingly with one hand. His uncle pulled him to his feet, and Heck shrugged free. He was dizzy, and leaned against a tree for support.

"Come on home, then," said his uncle, and picked up the gun. "Next time you lay hands on this gun, or any other, you'll get worse, until you prove you've got sense enough to use it right."

Heck hurt in every joint, but he walked. He thought of Dave, lying in bed all these months and hurting a lot more. It gave him a curious feeling. He'd felt ashamed of shooting Dave, and guilty about it, and clean-to-the-bone mad about it; but right now he felt sorry for all the suffering Dave had endured, and he was glad Dave was going to come home safe and well.

I did wrong going out after rabbit when Uncle said not to, he thought, and I got nothing but what was coming to me. It was even more than that. He had a cleaned-out feeling, as if he'd been paid off for a lot of things he'd done, going way back, wrongs of thought as well as of action. He staggered, but he pulled himself up and kept on walking.

"You gonna make out all right now?" his uncle asked.

Heck took a look around him at the new-looking world. A fellow could sure see a long way through the woods in this light!

"I'll make out just fine," he said; "let's get on home."

It Was Ours

• William Sayres

When he got off the bus in Red Falls, he was at first too nervous to look directly at things. He was obsessed with melodramatic phrases: "crisis of life"; "coming home"; "climax"; "turning point." He rejected them all, sat on a newly varnished bench until the nervousness passed, then left the bus station.

His first impression was *I won't find it here; the place has turned into bars and churches.* He stopped at the first bar he came to, went in. He felt he wanted to order several drinks at once. "Oh, whisky and soda," he told the bartender.

The bartender brought the drink, rang up forty cents from the dollar tossed on the counter. When he brought back the change, spreading it out so the customer would know this was an honest place, Bill said, "This used to be Kaner's, didn't it?"

"So?" The bartender wasn't interested.

"Forget it. I used to have sodas here, is all."

"Dandy for you." The bartender moved away, started nibbling on some pretzels.

Bill finished his drink, decided to try another place before seeing if the house was still there. *Put it off,* he thought, *you've put it off for twenty years; you'd better put it off another twenty minutes before you find out you've put it off too long.* He glanced at the man on the stool next to him. "Hot day," he said.

"Buh," the man said. He was lean, red faced, looked like a farmer.

"You a farmer?" Bill asked.

"Buh," the man said. "Furniture, Grand Rapids."

We're all tourists, Bill thought. *Anyway, the ones who look like farmers are. It seems you're always fooled.* He left his stool, picked up his change.

"Relax, stranger," said the man. "No fault of yours."

"Something I have to see," Bill said. "I'm not leaving because of you."

"Fact is," said the man, "I *am* a farmer. It's just that all the tourists figure I am, and got to ask about it. So I unsettle 'em a little. Nothing against you."

"Maybe you know my family, we used to come here summers. We had a house here. Sayres."

"Sayres? Never heard the name. Just moved here three years ago. I figured you wasn't a tourist, anyway."

"Maybe I am." He left, moved down the street toward the beach. *Bars and churches.* He stopped at what used to be a toy store. Inside a combo was rehearsing behind the bar.

"What's yours?" the bartender asked.

"Whisky and soda."

"What you hear's just practice. The real thing comes at eight. You want to stick around till then, I can give you a little sandwich."

"No, thanks. I just want to look at a house, that's all."

"We got some cute girls here. From

Detroit. They got a good act. Nothing against the law, but the law's like rubber up here. You know what I mean?"

"I guess so."

"You want that sandwich?"

"No, thanks." He paused, tried not to ask it. "What happened to the toy store that used to be here?"

The bartender looked suspicious. "How you know there used to be a toy store here?"

"I came here summers. We had a house here."

The bartender smiled. "You look it. No offense. We make money, we got to expect checks. But we're clean. We've got a lot of money that says we're clean. The fact is, old man Bluder still owns the place."

"But it was toys he went in for, he was crazy for kids, he —"

"He still likes kids. He don't let 'em in under any circumstances. The thing is, man, he found a doll." The bartender winked. "No skin off mine, no skin off yours, right?"

"I guess so."

"Liverwurst," said the bartender. "We got good liverwurst. Now let me fix you a good liverwurst sandwich, and then you can take in all those cute little numbers from Detroit."

"I'd like to," Bill said, "but there's nothing afterwards. I get all worked up, and there's nothing afterwards."

"Ain't it the truth," the bartender said. He wiped the counter energetically. "There's nothing afterwards." He put down the rag. "People knock themselves out for it, and there's nothing afterwards. Look, why don't you just have the sandwich. The only good thing we got's liverwurst."

"Thanks," Bill said, "but I got to see the house."

"Your funeral. What was the name?"

"Sayres."

"Sorry. I've only been here six years. The name's familiar, you know, but not so I'd know what house you mean."

"No reason you should. You still haven't brought my drink."

"Coming right up. Just didn't want you shelling out sixty cents for the Detroit girls, you know. A sorehead might kick. So we got to make sure beforehand. It's too early, so we told you, so we're safe. You want girls, we give you liverwurst to hold you off. You still want your drink, you get it." He mixed the drink, putting two jiggers of whisky in it. "So you come to look at a house?"

"That's right."

"Take my word for it, buddy, it won't be worth it."

"I guess I know that. But at least I won't have to think about it any more."

"Suit yourself."

"Sure." He finished the drink in two gulps, slid off the stool, left his three quarters on the counter, and went outside.

When he came to the parkway leading to the beach, he turned left along a narrow asphalt path. *It's still narrow, but they've paved it, and even the paving is old.* He looked for the blueberries that used to grow beside the path, realizing that it was not quite the season for them. *Blueberries shmuberries. I wouldn't know a blueberry plant from a holly wreath.*

He came to the state campsite, turned left again. *This, at least, looks the same. Large, dusty tents with the smell of too many children.* He walked up the hill and followed the road down along the ball park fence. The house was ahead; he could see it

if he looked at it, but he did not look at it until he reached the driveway.

So there it is, screen porches spilling into the yard and all. He was surprised that it was so recognizable. *Probably a recreation room and bar inside.* Before he had time to think it over, he went up the steps and knocked on the screen door.

A girl in blue jeans came to the door. "Yes?"

"Excuse me," he said. "It's just that I used to live here, summers. I thought I'd like to see the place again. Maybe you're that way about places you've lived."

"I've always lived right here." She was thin and pale, with washed-out brown hair and tired brown eyes. He decided she would be very pretty, though, with ten hours sleep and more time in the sun. *Why wasn't she tanned? People came up here to get the tan.* "Eighteen years," she said.

"We had the place till I was twelve," he said, wondering if it all would end in talk on the porch steps. "Guess you moved in a couple of years afterwards. I think the Spencers had it right after we did. I lost track then."

"Oh?" she said vaguely. "You a Spencer?"

"No. Sayres, Bill Sayres."

"I never heard a name like that before. But that's your problem, not mine." She twisted a loose button on her blue work shirt. "There was a Bill Spencer, though. You sure you ain't Bill Spencer?"

"I'm sure. Most of the time, anyway."

"So you want to take a look inside?"

"If it's not too much trouble for you."

She looked behind her, at the inside front door. "I'll go see if it is," she said. She went inside.

The porches encircling the house were, as far as they were visible, bare. When he lived here, he remembered, they were always cluttered with cots, chairs, and newspapers. He was about to start around the side, to see how far the bareness went, when she came back. "It ain't too much trouble," she said.

He followed her inside. The rooms were almost as bare as the porches. What impressed him most was that the large round dining room table was gone. He had never been able to think about the house without identifying it closely with that table. They had all prayed, eaten, talked, and played games around that table so often it almost seemed as if some summers had passed without leaving it. There was no furniture at all in the dining room and none that he could see in the two open bedrooms. In the living room were two rocking chairs and a bed on either side of the fireplace; nothing else except a dime store plate with incense ashes, on the floor between the beds. On one of the beds an old man sat, as pale and thin as the girl and, like her, wearing blue jeans and a blue work shirt.

"Grampa," said the girl, "this here's Bill Spencer come to call." She sat on the other bed.

"Bill Spencer, hey?" said the old man. "Well, it's about time."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I'm not Bill Spencer, I —"

"That's even worse," said the old man. "First you wait forever, and then you're not even Bill Spencer." He pulled a package of incense from his work shirt pocket, bent over, and put a piece on the plate.

"Sit over here," said the girl, "the rockers ain't been tested lately." Bill sat on the bed next to her. "Grampa's a little crazy," she whispered to him.

"I heard that," said the old man, lighting the incense. "Being crazy ain't so bad." He sniffed the smoke deeply. "Besides, Sandra ain't so normal herself."

"Pretty name, Sandra," said Bill, trying not to choke on the thick white smoke. *Must be old and dry, to burn like that.*

"Sandra Elsevelt Lerner," said the girl proudly. "I always sort of liked the whole thing."

"Not that she's had much else to like," said the old man. "Stuck in here taking care of me. Her own fault, though; I never asked her to stay. Let 'em put me in a booby hatch, it's all the same. Long as they let me burn a little incense now and then." He lay back on the bed.

"How's the place look to you?" Sandra asked.

"About the same, I guess. The kind of furniture you remember in a place makes a difference, though."

"We got rid of most of the stuff here. Never used it." She started twisting the button on her shirt again. "Didn't bring much money, but we never needed much. The only thing I was really sorry about was a big round table in the dining room. Came with the place. Sort of hated to lose that."

"Well," said the old man, "there ain't much point in having something just to *have* it. What I say is, if we all got to go sometime, why let furniture stay?"

"But you're not going for a long time." Bill was getting used to the smoke now; pungent, heady, it was blurring the years as the drinks had not done. "A long time," he repeated, talking now about himself and years he'd been away. "Maybe not so long," he added.

"Well now, Spencer," said the old man, "that's just it. Not so long, you see."

"A year or so," said the girl.

"Hold on a second," Bill said. "You look fine, sir. I mean, you look as if you've got plenty of time left."

"It ain't me," snorted the old man. "It's *her*."

"My heart got a sort of hole in it," Sandra said. "Don't ask me just what piece it was got left out. Anyway, can't nothing be done about it. If the Clinic people know, they ain't saying."

"Them Clinic people sure are sneaky," grumbled the old man. "You go up there to get a tooth pulled, and they find a hole in your heart. Why'd they want to give her all that trouble, Spencer?"

"They didn't give me nothing, Grampa. They just *found* it, that's all. It ain't their fault it was there."

"Well, why'd they have to go finding it, then? If it can't be fixed, who wants to know about it?"

"Excuse me," Bill said. "It's probably none of my business, but there's a lot they can do about hearts now. Every little while they seem to come up with a new way of operating. There ought to be somebody who could fix you up, Sandra."

"They checked on that," Sandra said. "The right kind plug for my type hole ain't been found yet. Oh, they got some people might like to spearmint on me, but even if it didn't cost like crazy, I ain't about to play games like that. Let 'em spearmint on somebody else."

"You figure maybe this incense

might help her, Spencer? Anyway, it's all I got."

"I don't know about that, sir."

"Leave off, Grampa. He don't want to hear about no leaky heart. Maybe they was all wrong up there, maybe I'll be just as old and crazy as you someday."

"That's my girl," said the old man proudly. "Now you go get the record, and I'll put on some more incense for Spencer here."

"What record?" Bill asked.

"The laughing record," said the old man, putting two pieces of incense on the plate and lighting them.

"I'm not sure I know what you mean, sir."

"Just get a whiff of that stuff, Spencer," said the old man, waving his head around in the fresh smoke. "It got all them spices in it. If *that* don't fix her up, nothing will. I can't do no worse than the Clinic people, anyway. That sure is good stuff."

"It seems to burn fast enough."

"We had it for a long time. Her daddy was in the business. When he kicked off some fifteen years back, all he left was a couple tons of the stuff. We kept it in the attic, sold what we could of it. Never much used it till the Clinic people found what they found. It sure is powerful stuff."

Sandra came in from the kitchen, pushing an old hand-wound victrola on coasters. "We listened to it for breakfast," she said, smiling at Bill, "but it sounds better in here."

"Park it a little closer this time," said the old man. "You got to be right inside that noise, or it won't get to you the way it should. Same thing goes for the smoke, Spencer. Lean over a little more; once it gets to the ceiling it's wasted."

Sandra moved the victrola in front of the nearer bedroom door and wound it. "That smoke's awful thick, Grampa. I can hardly make out where I am."

"Just start 'er up and grope your way back," said the old man. "You know, Spencer, I ain't had to use my pipe once since we put this stuff to work."

The music started now. It was an old record, a novelty number with a pseudo-serious rendition interrupted by ever-mounting rolls and bellows of laughter. Squeaks, giggles, titters, guffaws, snickers, and booming gusts mingled in contrived hysteria. Bill could barely see the old man perched on his bed, his head bent toward the plate, his thin body beginning to shake with the hilarity he heard. Sandra came stumbling out of the white swirls, slumping down beside Bill, wiping her eyes from the smoke or laughter or both.

The first time through the record Bill sat numbed and disoriented. The sound was shattering, and it was all he could do to keep breathing and hoping the record would end. But Sandra was up and back before it could, and there it was, starting all over again. The old man was cackling now, and Sandra was rocking against him. He began to feel stronger than he had ever felt in his life, as if all the sensations he had ever had were moving slowly toward his head, and lifting him in the process, and though all he could see now were the old man's trembling knees, he felt that these were emphatically the most important and sacred sight that had ever come to him. He inhaled anxiously, not wanting to lose any part of it all.

Again Sandra plunged away and back, and he could no longer see the old man's knees, and he no longer felt Sandra's rocking against him.

He was in an old, old room, sitting on his bed near the fireplace, and the draft had jammed again, and the rich pine smoke was filling the room. There was laughter, young and old together, coming from his mother's bedroom. Most of the family would be there, surprising her with the birthday or Mother's Day presents she had paid for, would always pay for. He would take his in last. At least the note with it was all his; he had worked it out carefully on the dining room table, checking some of the spelling with his uncle shaving on the back porch. Too bad there was so much fog, or they could go to the ball park afterwards. His bed felt comfortable, but he hoped he would not have to take a nap. Anyway, they couldn't very well expect him to sleep, with all the noise. Maybe they were laughing at *him*. Well, why not? At least it was attention. The way he was, always waiting to go in last, he could go through life without being noticed. He would have to go ask his uncle about that. Though his uncle wasn't much noticed either. Maybe that's why he always seemed to be shaving on the back porch or sitting in a corner somewhere, letting other people make all the noise. Maybe they both needed the noise, but they didn't much care about making it.

The noise was louder now, and his uncle — no, it was somebody else — was putting something on a plate and lighting it; now he was gone in the smoke, whoever he was. Maybe it was the man from the Episcopalian church come to call; he made smoke like that in his church and brought the smell of it with him.

No, it wasn't anybody from the church. It was the old man he'd found here, the one they called Spencer. No, it was somebody else they called Spencer. And there was someone trying to ask him something, someone right beside him. "Again? Again?" he heard. "No!" he shouted. "Let it end!"

"Just once more," the voice insisted. Instantly he knew it was Sandra and that all he was now was a man with the wrong name in the wrong house. And when the laughter swelled, he joined in, yelling it out. It was all a joke, all ludicrous, that's all it was and all he was. He howled with the others.

Sandra was up again, lurching toward the screechers. "My turn!" he shouted, feeling somehow that he had to start the record over before she did. He caught up with her as she was trying to rewind the victrola. "Let me!" he shouted. "No!" she yelled back. He tried to pull her her away, and they swayed together in the smoke. Recklessly he kissed her, and she bit him fiercely. "It's mine to do!" she said, crying. The victrola was running down now, and the laughing became a low wounded growling, pierced by the high wail of the old man.

He stumbled outside and headed for the bus station. When he came to the bar with the combo, he found the bartender sweeping in front. "You find the house okay?"

"Yes, thanks."

"Kind of disappointing, hey?"

"No," Bill said, feeling almost wholly immersed still in smoke and sound. "I can't say it was disappointing."

"Going to leave right away?"

"I guess so."

"Why not stick around for the show? Almost time for the real thing."

"I know," Bill said, "it's always almost time."

The Christian Artist as Maker

• Claude F. Koch

> The creative writer and artist continue the work of the Incarnation. Through their work, the Word of God is made flesh anew — not indeed in the human flesh of another Christ — but in the matter of words, images, color, sound, light and shadow.
>
> —*Epigraph, Centenary Celebration.*

i

There are phrases, some quite commonplace, that may arouse feelings of unease to be resolved only by willful forgetting. The phrase must be put out of mind. The feeling has something to do with temperament and the quality of attention applied to the phrase. When one hears a class of students in opening prayer hurry indifferently over the words "*Lead us not into temptation,*" one may have this feeling. It may seem that if he should ever have the courage to examine the implications of this phrase, he would be cut adrift in a smothering sea. Such a phrase appears in the above epigraph: "The creative writer and artist continue the work of the Incarnation. Through their work, the Word of God is made flesh anew . . ." It has a sweet sound, like the angel's wings of myth — and the same potential beat to terror. Fortunately, it is sufficiently metaphor that the terror in it may be contemplated, as we contemplate the sun through smoked glasses. Metaphor is language at play, and it is best that a proposition of this nature be encountered at play.

In Charles Williams' Arthurian cycle, the knightly fool Dinadan appalls the poet Taliessen by calling to his attention that he is being named the "lieutenant of God's new grace in the streets of Camelot." Arthur's poet sees that this phrase, like the one just quoted, has the seeds of self-destruction in it. But Dinadan advises him to "take the lieutenancy for the sake of the shyness the excellent absurdity holds." Taliessen is comforted: he realizes this is just another of the verbal guises under which he is to learn he is superfluous.

> Must I be once more superfluous?
> . . . . verse is superfluous, and I even to verse.

And then Dinadan:

> Any may be; one must. To neighbor
> whom and as the Omnipotence wills is a fetch
> of grace; the lowest wretch is called the greatest
> — and may be — on the feast of fools. The God-bearer
> is the prime and sublime image of entire superfluity.
>
> . . . Take the largess, think yourself the less; bless heaven. . . .

ii

In that temper, one may contemplate the high function assigned in recent tradition (Christian or otherwise) to the Maker. The jolliest part of it is that the Maker is not likely to give the matter much thought at all (despite the lure of the market for such information), and it's well that he does not. Introspection in terms of the detailed examination by the Maker of his own processes — and, perhaps, even of his own goals — seems unhealthy. Narcissism of one kind or another is always just around the corner in modern making, and one works hard enough for detachment not to imperil it by such ventures. Perhaps one should become casually aware of the process and the goal, and even more casually aware of the obligations. Courses in marriage have been preceded by centuries of "unpreparedness," during which, quite casually, men and women, in each particular case, came to know the terms (different in each particular case) in which the mystery of marriage could be lived. In these things, casual knowledge does not imply frivolous or comfortable knowledge — quite the contrary. The hard reality of that knowledge is manifest by the immutable fact of the tart experience of it.

So, in this spirit also, one may examine the proposition: The Christian artist as Maker and Creator. It remains to be said that one's qualifications are inevitably limited — in this case severely so; the remarks that follow propose impressions acquired in the practice of but one type of making. One recognizes also that it is usually not difficult to distinguish the theory that the individual Maker proposes from the fact of his practice: the more coherent and detailed the general theory, the less likely it is to mirror the particular practice, unless the practice is moribund. Generalizations on the practice of an art proposed by a particular Maker may (and usually do if they are fragmentary enough) represent a rationalization of his own practice — the more high-sounding, the more likely a rationalization. This isn't really bad; it is, in fact, good. One is just as likely in practicing an art to do the right thing for one of a number of lesser good reasons than for the wrong reason; the rationalization helps the Maker see the reason he might have done it for, and, indeed, in the future may do something for — if he sustains the practice and is worthy. Anyone may fall into grace.

iii

A Christian, by the nature of his context, must "see" differently from other men (who, in their turn, "see" in the unique terms their contexts require): the Word made flesh resounds in the chamber of the consciousness, a pattern modifying all others — heard often as ineptly as Mrs. Moore heard, in that scene in the Marabar Caves in Forster's *Passage to India*, the awful name of God. The Christian's Christianity assures a tone in his life, as does the Jew's Judaism or the Buddhist's Buddhism. Perhaps what Christianity is for most of us is most surely a posture of the spirit constantly defining itself by gesture, constantly rationalizing itself by thought — the work of art itself a gesture that may or may not obviously encompass thought. We carry this Christianity, more or less satisfactorily, as a shaping recollection of its

phenomenal representations in the images of our consciousness — as a shaping habit in the often uncalculated yet ceremonial gestures of our body and spirit. We are the vehicles bearing Christianity forward in time, among the artifacts of her past life.

For the Maker who has worked under the full influence of Christianity as a fact of history, its simulacrum (image, shadowy representation) is the matrix of his work as a whole; and he imitates details of the simulacrum in each work he makes. His imitations must of necessity imply the whole. The simulacrum of Christianity as each Maker knows it is a private thing and may be inadequate enough, indeed, in terms of an ideal one. The simulacrum is the reduction of the complex phenomena of Christianity to the essential pattern. It is this he imitates. The essential pattern is an abstraction from life, as the idea of the dance is an abstraction from movement. It is the ideal whose shadow is made actual in the work of art. Only the shadow, though, because imitating at the same time (if he is a writer) the ideal complex of language, that abstraction too takes on the flesh of the particular, masking spirit. One must distinguish between an abstraction of Christianity (the simulacrum that is the ideal: a complex of major and minor phases, attitudes, events, admonitions, legends, myths, miracles, symbols, ceremonies, memories) and an abstraction of the life of Christ as a fact of history. The Maker is interested in the life of Christ as an event in Christianity, supplying elements contributing toward the total pattern.

Certainly, the ideal religion for man, like the perfect art for man, would take into account the demands of his total nature and the hierarchy of his faculties — if common human nature and a hierarchy of faculties are not illusions. God does not "need" religion — man needs it if it is needed at all: so the focus of its structure is man's nature, not God's. Those who think of Christianity as the religion most closely approximating the ideal in time because most amenable to man's nature — those Christian writers and artists — work under the assumption that it is more satisfactory, because more inclusive, than any system of art and so is to be accepted as providing the shaping context in which art is practiced by a Christian. It provides the major simulacrum that is the matrix of his work. To the resisting or hostile or indifferent intellect, it may simply be the intractable and generally incomprehensible bare bones of doctrine. To the Christian, it is as fully directing, omnipresent, pervasive, annoying, misunderstood as the spirit that controls his own body. About it and the Christian, we may say, as Yeats has said in another context, "How can we know the dancer from the dance?"

Christianity itself in its manifestation in time is retrospective. It calls constant attention to a past fact, an historical fact, renewed daily without abrogating the historical fact. By ritual, it carries history forward. It does not disown the past in language or in life as a principle of its being. It is neither retrospective nor prophetic alone — it is both. The Christian Maker, to the degree that Christianity is a shaping spirit in him, will re-enact this pattern (the past alive in the present, the present holding potentially the future, eternity shadowing time) in the techniques of his literary generation. Christianity does not propose that we interest ourselves only in obvious emblems of the eternal: we are directed to be interested in many historical facts,

miracles, pronouncements. One would think that the Christian Maker has his clue for working here: the degree to which the art object suggests the fullness of the Christian matrix (the dance that catches up the dancer) is the degree to which it has been theoretically most desirably functional in the life of the Maker.

iv

One can, as we say, "read as a Christian" just as one can, to some degree, exercise the historical imagination and read as a Greek of the fifth century before Christ. But one must *be* a Christian artist. There is no posing under the mantle of the historical imagination here. In art no masquerade is successful. It is perhaps not discernible how one creates consciously as a Christian — it would be best if we could not abstract from a condition to observe this. The work comes into being as a result of a quality of mind and sensibility, a condition of the spirit: all posing is always forbidden.

We are, of course, what we think, what our imagination dwells upon (and, most important, this subsumes the manner of dwelling). The real and secret world of the artist or anybody else is that imaginative landscape across which all our actions are tested (more fleetingly than calculated thought) before they emerge into shape — concrete and, as we say, objective in the actual world. If one wants some clue to the land he lives in, he considers the art he contemplates or the art he makes, that modifies the actual world by coloring the landscape of the mind as surely as a red spotlight modifies a moonlit landscape. This must make the Christian, writer or artist, pause.

If a Christian has the need (because he wants the joy) of recollecting, reordering, and recreating in art, he must accept a challenge. If he is working, say, in fiction or verse, he confronts techniques and required postures that have been lately established in a materialistic society (or at best in a society whose Christianity has been diluted or dissipated in the stream of materialism). These techniques have been very powerfully turned to the uses of materialism, even a prophetic materialism — to a posture of the spirit that implies that the moment is all, or that the individual consciousness is the ultimate reality. So the Christian writer may enter into a certain conflict by the conditions of his most desired response (a recreational, a celebrational response). He must find how to rest with grace in a Procrustean bed.

v

The artist has always depended to a great degree on the perceptions of the scientist; the scientist has provided him with generalizations concerning details of the world (and methods for encountering them) that he would celebrate in their particulars or make concrete by personification. In the older Christian tradition, the theologian and the philosopher were the correlators, the co-ordinators of knowledge, the generalizers upon experience — and the Maker took his cue from them. Now the physical scientist, the psychologist, and the sociologist supply the Maker with his data (particularly, one would think, the latter two) — and their method is essentially the method

of the statistician who takes everything seriously as evidence of something or other. Some evidences should dissolve in a burst of laughter, and then they would cease to be available. But the sociologist-statistician, especially, needs everything, and on precisely the same level (because questions of value are unscientific questions). The poet and the novelist eat from his hands. The very nature of the work of the scientist of personality and the scientist of society makes it difficult to be concerned with decency and goodness. It is easier to count crimes than charities. Everyman has become the "average man," the statistical man, a butt or a neurotic; and the artist in the throes of a disappointed romanticism recoils from that man whom he suspects he is and whom he delineates.

In the Christian tradition there is no "average man." Sense experience, the recollection of sense experience, the rhetoric of sense experience are masks that the individual soul puts on. Clothing Everyman (the soul of mankind seen under the aspect of mortality), the Christian Middle Ages identified and glorified in its art the garments congenial to the soul: the garment of the pilgrim (Everyman with his stave and scallop shell and earth-colored robe), the particolored garment of the fool, the garment of the chorister who attends and chants at ceremonial occasions of joy or sorrow. When the artist approximates these garments according to the mode that his art permits, he is perpetuating a Christian tradition in art.

Christianity is a context implying a total view; so the Christian writer and artist are impelled to perfect their craft to the degree that they can hint at the whole, by tone if nothing else. The particular view must be corrected by tone so that one knows "this is not all." Sentimentality is immanent when there is a loss of tone; right tone implies right evaluation. The lack of evaluation assures sentimentality. Why should not the problem that plagues man in the total life plague him also in the partial life that making is: proper balance between matter and spirit, between the demands of time and the demands of eternity? The Maker is not permitted to surrender his center as a man as he works.

The Maker, of course, selects and magnifies; and how bothersome it has become to realize how many powerful and attractive artists and writers have by their selection and magnification (uncorrected by tone that implies "this is not all") imposed ways of seeing that the Christian's life will not really sustain — or that perhaps very few lives will sustain.

vi

As children, we collected jigsaw puzzles, perhaps, and sometimes the parts of odd puzzles would fit, were interchangeable (especially when they were the cheap ones). We would get our puzzles often second-hand, and all the parts of any one puzzle would hardly be there. We dreamed of a whole world, and when we had fitted the parts together, the finished puzzle would almost, but not quite, say something to the eye eager to see a whole. Alas, the coherence was on the surface alone, in the fitting alone.

For every Maker there is the temptation to succumb to a surface coherence — easier to achieve for the craftsman than the craftsman is likely to

admit. The work should be the flowering of a series of internal consistencies: beginning with the ordered sensibility of the Maker, the Christian, a social being with all the obligations *that* implies to the Christian (the dancer indistinguishable from the dance). The internal consistency of the work itself — never apparent outside the context of the life that makes it and the lives that confront it. The work of art, in itself, is a convenient abstraction for the purpose of criticism. It does not exist, except as a phenomenon — which intellect identifies as an artifact; and appreciation, finally, as a work of art. Its internal consistency is an extension of the potential consistency of the life that made it or the potential of the lives that confront it.

The Christian Maker must be circumspect in the presence of this fact. What he fashions is not a phenomenon in space or time alone, but (and this is an aspect of what it *is*, and not simply a possible effect of it) a wedge for prying open or a mold for ordering spirit. The artist as Christian cannot assume that he may abdicate his obligations as a social being. One would want to compare his experience with that of the teacher who, as he matures in experience, grows more and more careful of what he says and of how he says it — realizing the possible consequences to others (having himself passed through the stages in the teaching career in which he exhibits himself, is enthralled by the sound of his own voice, idolizes himself as a wit or a fountain of wisdom, etc.). Then, all apprenticeship to disorder cast aside, the teacher realizes that he is simply a functionary, a vehicle to be used in the service of something greater than himself. So the Christian artist. The concern is to discover what this something greater is. It is, one would think, the medium of Christianity in which he lives as the fish lives in the sea: it is, as Emerson said of something slightly different, the soul of his soul. One cannot conceive of the Christian artist who is not a vehicle for perpetuating that elusive but very real posture of the soul that Christianity is in the individual life. Like the fish in water, the Christian makes his life of the only medium in which he can breathe.

The Christian Maker realizes that he works by sufferance: the source of his joy can never be permitted to become a source of pride. There is always the danger of pride: the exercise of a craft one loves may lead a man to self-indulgence ("art is all"); introspection concerning its processes may result in a kind of narcissism. The Christian Maker is not permitted to experiment upon himself, to play with his own emotions, to abuse his body or his mind. He is not permitted to seek out the unhealthy in art any more than he is in life — for itself alone. The Christian writer or artist may "fall into" what is degrading, as in life the Christian may fall into doubt. When this occurs, the struggle to resolve the matter may, with the grace of God, be all to the good — yielding the splendid work of art as it may yield the splendid life. But a man had better be careful that he does not encourage the fall, simply for the "experience."

Christianity must terrify us to some degree by the implications it continually confronts us with concerning the presence of others. The obligation to recognize this never ceases. Every Christian stands potentially condemned by what he claims to believe. The soldier who does not swear an oath of loyalty is fortunate; if he swears the oath, he establishes grounds for his own

destruction. The charity that Christianity demands and by which the Christian stands judged must extend to the characters one makes in fiction, to the figures one delineates on canvas. Reverence is all. No human soul, real or imagined, may be contemplated with contempt; no human faculty may be mirrored with contempt. Creation is not contemptible. The artist by his tone must do what Christianity as the matrix of his art does: correct the partial view.

Before the term *fun* meant the adult's surrender of adulthood, we went to the fair as children and had fun. On the carrousel we went around and around, and the mirror at the still center opened vista after vista, reflecting the lights changing over the people changing in their postures and their movements. The Maker is that child whose movements on the merry-go-round are rigidly restricted, yet who, by facing the mirror at the still center, may come quite joyfully and without calculation to know his own movements and the world beyond them — vistas opening on to other lives never seen wholly, potentially waking him to selflessness. And as the calliope plays, the rider knows that this is not all, though it is all that he can see. All that he can see is not all — something must be taken on faith.

vii

In this century, the Maker is encouraged to the feeling that he is somehow different when he works as an artist — elevated, prophetic, and immune. In a word, important beyond other souls. This is his temptation; and because he is a Maker, it may manifest itself in exotic themes (or no themes at all) and exotic techniques. His greatest commodity is his sensibility. On one hand he is encouraged to narcissism and the exotic in vision and style that often thinly disguises (if it disguises at all) a contempt for the rest of creation; on the other hand he is encouraged to the mask of detachment that may become simply a posture of irresponsibility.

A discussion of the Christian Maker could begin and end with the theme of humility. Humility has nothing to do with obsequiousness, and little in common with the current ambiguous concept of modesty. It is an active stance made inevitable by the nature of experience seen in a Christian context (and indeed in any mature context). Like the other virtues (that is to say, the other strengths, powers), it celebrates in its appearance, order and proportion.

The Christian and The Appreciation of Art

• Brother Fidelian, F.S.C.

I should like to say a few words about the Christian and the appreciation of art. These two concepts suggest a number of interesting and very persistent problems. Some of the problems concern negative possibilities. There is what is typically called the problem of "poetry and belief": does a reader have to have knowledge of and sympathy with Milton's theology in order to enjoy *Paradise Lost;* does another person have to be committed to Catholicism to enjoy the fullness of Dante's *Divine Comedy?* There is, again, the problem of "art and prudence"; should I read this artistic novel if I know it will likely be an occasion of sin for me? There is the larger but quite similar problem of a whole community's moral health and the right of artists in it to freedom of expression — the problem of "art and censorship."

But let us, especially on this very happy occasion, put aside such weighty and, as I say, rather negative, problems to consider briefly the more important problem of how the Christian, in a positive way, can make use of works of art. Is he to confront them no differently from the non-believer, or is there to be something special in his approach to Shakespeare and to Updike? Must he, on the one hand, forego what Father Hopkins once called "dangerous mortal beauty"? Or can he, on the other hand, somehow return human beauty to Christ, whom the same poet describes as "beauty's self and beauty's giver"? Or is it possible that he can escape his Christian commitment for a fleeting moment and indulge himself purely and simply in the human values which achievement in art represents? Such questions set the dimensions for our present remarks.

Let us begin by recalling that the appreciation of art, like its production, involves both a native endowment — what we call taste — and also a species of skill, the development of that taste by education and experience. Art, as the Thomist would say briefly, is *recta ratio factibilium*, the correct knowledge of how to make things. Appreciation, we might say, then, is *recta contemplatio factibilium*, the correct contemplation of things that have been made well.

Furthermore, as the artist can produce his work of art only by intending the good of his work (whatever else he may intend with it), so the appreciator of art cannot really respond to the work (whatever else he may use it for) unless he reacts to its essential, its artistic goodness. "Art," says Maritain, "keeps making straight and not Action, and so remains outside the line of human conduct, with an end, rules, and value, which are not those of the man but of the work to be produced." The process of writing a short story, therefore, and the process of appreciating it, are autonomous, are distinct

from and independent of practical or moral or religious acts.

And here should be an end to our problem, except that never, in this world at least, do we find any man who is simply an artist or writer or simply an appreciator of art or literature. Rather we find artists and appreciators who are sons or fathers of families, businessmen or teachers, citizens and Christians. We find, that is, that artists and appreciators are men with many goals in life besides that of producing and appreciating art. And, for our present purpose, we find especially that all such men have one ultimate goal, the infinitely interesting and eternally joyful conversation we call the Beatific Vision. How, then, are we to reconcile the demand that the writer work for and the reader respond to the literary piece itself and the demand that every human act be directed to, be worthy of, the ultimate goal. A perfect reconciliation we cannot, perhaps, ever achieve or even fully understand, for the road to such perfect harmonization is the difficult one of respecting the demands of both created beauty in words and of Christ, the Uncreated Word.

A first and important step forward in this task, however, is to think of art as an end in itself, but an *intermediate* end. Brushing one's teeth we tolerate or suffer — simply as a *means* to dental health; it is not something we do for the joy of brushing our teeth. It is a *means*. On the other hand, we can work at a job, and such work can be a human good in itself. But normally we involve such work in a chain, a concatenation of intermediate or relative ends: we work to provide security for ourselves and, perhaps, a family; we seek security to achieve the good human life; we achieve the good human life to give scope to the life of Christ in us; we grow in the life of Christ to achieve the Beatific Vision. Here each of the first ends has a real value in itself, but it is ordained to a further end and, finally, to the Ultimate End. Thus, to have friends, to raise a family, to seek the truth in education, to appreciate art — these are all ends, for they have clear and apparent desirability in themselves, but they must be relative and intermediate ends. Only for the pagan can they be the end-all-and-be-all. The essential point here, however, is that the appreciation of art must be achieved first as an end in itself before it can be directed further to Christ. A mathematician cannot direct his work to Christ by offering simply his problem without working to its proper solution; we cannot direct our reading of a novel unless we have achieved in real measure the appreciation which the book deserves.

This position — that art and its appreciation can be for the Christian true but intermediate ends — has some important implications. First of all, it means that for the Christian as much as for the most art-for-art's-sake nonbeliever, the beauty of art is good. He can associate his delight in it with the joyful reaction of the Creator to His own works and their beauty, a reaction repeated so often in the account of *Genesis,* "God saw all that he had made and found it very good" (Gen. 1:31).

Secondly, this position implies that artistic beauty cannot be the total of all value or even the most important of many values in the life of the Christian. On the one side, it is clear that beauty pales into insignificance before the grace of Christ; on the other, that it is not as essential as the basic values of civilization — the health of the commonweal promoted by politics, let us say, or the security of nations defended by law. But upon a civilization men

do erect a culture (if we may be permitted this rough distinction), and, in the process, the creation and appreciation of beauty plays as important and serious a role as any other human endeavor. While it would be trivial for a man to devote his whole life to the enjoyment of art, it is a serious necessity that he devote a part of his leisure to it. And, thus, it is important that, in any culture, some men devote themselves as a life's work to creating art; some others, to its study; some others still, to training many to its appreciation.

Thirdly, this position suggests that the Christian can and should enjoy the beauty of art to its fullest extent, that is, with the joyful abandon, the fine ecstasy which characterizes what we call the aesthetic experience. Now many a Jansenist, Puritan, not to say pious Catholic, will look upon such an idea as dangerous, undisciplined, and even irrational. Perhaps, no better answer can be made to such critics of intense human pleasure than to recall a remark St. Thomas makes in his defense of the "irrational" pleasure of the marriage act — that "it is not against virtue that the workings of reason sometimes are interruped by something that takes place in accordance with reason: otherwise it would be contrary to virtue to sleep" (*Summa Theo.* II-II, 153, art. 2, ad 2).

What I am suggesting here of course is that in the aesthetic experience, concentration on the intellectual and sensuous response itself is also profound, but nonetheless human and good. Our Lord himself suggests the possibility of this complete involvement in created beauty. He refers to a man who seeks fine pearls and who finding one most beautiful sells all that he owns to buy it. And He speaks of the lilies of the field as being arrayed more splendidly than Solomon in all his glory.

But these illustrations of Christ bring us back to the crucial issue, for even in these passages we are presented with other values. It is the Kingdom of God which is represented by the most beautiful pearl; it is the provident love of God which is reflected in the lilies of the field. Nor is there any doubt that these supernatural realities are being presented as immensely more important and demanding values. As the Christian knows so well through his frequent failure to rise to them, their challenge is total. We are to love God and neighbor with our whole hearts and minds; we are to take up our cross daily; whether we eat or drink or whatever else we do, we are to do all for the glory of God (I Cor. 10, 31). As we return, therefore, to the confrontation of different values, which was the point of our departure, perhaps we have, at least, weighed more fully the intensity of the demands that they involve.

I can ask, then, whether in the face of commitment to Christ, I must sacrifice art and its appreciation. And I can answer: no, but it is necessary that I establish these things in a proper hierarchy of values. Is it necessary that I use art simply as an occasion for contemplating the beauty of God in the world? No, but it is essential that my enjoyment of any art be part of a life that grows constantly in grace and charity, that I be a vital Christian who is responding vitally to art. For only then can there be a question of the Christian use of art and its appreciation. Only then can these moments of special human joy become moments of growth in our likeness to Christ. Only then, in the words of Isaiah used in the Advent Liturgy, shall the Lord

make heard the glory of his voice in the joy of our hearts (Is. 30, 30).

In what such a mysterious synthesis of human joy and divine charity can consist we shall, perhaps, not know fully until, as St. Thomas More would have it, we have met together again in heaven "where we shall be merry forever and ever." But that this union of values can be achieved, here and now, we have a pledge in the mystery of the Incarnation itself. For the Christ who could say of Himself that before Abraham was, He is, and of whom it could also be said that he was the Son of Mary, the Eternal Word who was also the Infant Nazarene — it is He who is the ineffable mingling of human and divine. It is by His life in us that our most human activities, and certainly our moments of happiness in great human art, are divinized.

Parody — Walt Whitman

• **Joseph Beatty**

Why can I not celebrate the Fourth of July?
I am a man with full beard and true cheeks,
And surely a man with full beard and true cheeks
May celebrate in the park with the bees —
Unhived for a time, they lodge in my beard
And I croon to them and introduce them
To the mouse in my boot, who is indeed
Not the smallest miracle of all the miracles of God —
And the squirrels and the toads and the water rats
Frolicking through the grass with the children.

I see one young mother with a full belly
(Ah, she will soon be another mother!)
Screaming, and tearing a water rat from the child's hands;
I do not know why it is she is screaming.
Do not ask me, for I would not tear a water rat
From a child's hands. A water rat needs a child to belong to.
I would not favor a man holding a water rat
In his big, hairy, old, gnarled, lined hand; however,
I would not be in favor of it.
I cannot tell you why.

I wait with slobbering mouth to know, at this moment,
Why I am stopped from celebrating
The Fourth of July in the park
With the bees and the squirrels and the mice and
The water rats and the children and the young mother
On the First of May.

Theory

• Mother Mary Anthony, S.H.C.J.

A poem starts with an insight sharpened on
a very little, very concrete thing
in line of vision; grows, sheer noumenon,
like fruited clusters, feathers on a wing
laid each to each in perfect interpoise,
word after word. An iridescence plays
in shifting shades. Advancing light deploys
its hints and clarities. Darkness allays
bright fever. And the rhythms subtly cross,
drawing a web to catch the unicorn —
loom where the crystal shuttles swiftly toss
in whispered shower, storm wept, weaving the torn
struck spirit whole again, as Saul, when skill-
ful harpist's fingers plucked and swept, was still.

Christopher

• Raymond Roseliep

The young eyes of Christopher are green
and blue as the sea and a whole sea
is in them, with shadow hinting grey.
I could wish I did not feel the man
grown quickly in the four-years tender
as the air we both are taking now;
but on our prairie hike I will throw
pebbles to hide concern or wonder
when he questions why my cheek is wet
as I open a deserted pond,
tracing for him a larger design,
telling lies of the sea he has yet
to love and the mirror he will find
(shifting and false). And his eyes are mine.

"We Get Along Together Just Fine . . ."

● Louis D. Rubin, Jr.

Several years ago I had gone down to a college in Georgia to take part in a program having to do with Southern literature, and I arrived at my host's house just as a small party was getting under way. My host, his wife, a young writer from a near-by college, and myself sat about the living room, while Katherine Anne Porter and another well-known novelist occupied the settee in the center of the room, and we listened as Miss Porter and her fellow novelist proceeded to dissect the literary world. Writer after writer would come up, and each time Miss Porter would say something nice about the persons involved, while her companion would always have something derogatory to say. This went on all evening until finally, as I recall, the subject of Max Beerbohm arose. Miss Porter's fellow novelist declared that she didn't think very much of him at all. "Oh," said Miss Porter, "I *like* Max. He doesn't need me and I don't need him, and so we get along together just fine!"

Since reading *Ship of Fools*, I have several times thought of that evening. Not that Miss Porter's remark was a startlingly memorable one, but it seemed to typify her. She was the kind of person who *liked* people. And it seemed to me that this was perhaps one reason why Miss Porter was as fine a writer as she is. She wasn't interested in cutting people down to size. She took them as they came.

Now this may seem an odd thing to say about a novel in which a number of people are shown at their very worst and most cruel. But the point about *Ship of Fools* is that only a writer with great compassion for her fellow humans, and equally great revulsion at cruelty to humans, could have written it. A novelist who lacked Miss Porter's compassion could not have done so; he would have satirized those he disliked. Miss Porter does not satirize; she takes all the passengers aboard the ship with entire seriousness, the weak and strong alike. Because she is not biased, she looks squarely at them. The result is appalling.

No wonder the book took twenty years to write! It is a dissection of what is wrong with our times, a dread portrayal of the poisonous idolatries of racism, nationalism, selfishness, bigotry which have so infected the Western world. In that medium-sized ocean liner are gathered all the hatreds and fears and lusts which produced the catastrophe of the second world war.

The passengers aboard the ship are viewed individually and as a group. Truly Yeats's phrase describes them: "The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity." One reviewer, in *The New Yorker*, I think, commented that love as a positive force was missing entirely from

the lives of those aboard the ship. Precisely! And the power was what was largely missing from Europe between the wars; it was rendered impotent and helpless by hate. Buchenwald, Dachau, Lidice, the Katyn Forest, the Jewish ghetto in Warsaw are all prefigured in the behavior of the travelers. When the ship docks, they walk down a gangplank into what is about to become Hitler Germany. Miss Porter looked around her at a sick world, and she diagnosed its malady: the absence of love, of compassion. Only one who greatly believed in the necessity for human love and compassion, who was appalled and shocked by their absence, could have written *Ship of Fools.*

It is a religious novel, in the way that most so-called religious novels are not. Most of the religious novels I have read flaunt the author's religious conviction and look down smugly on the wretched unbelievers. Such novels make it seem extremely easy to believe in God, and it seems to me that it is very difficult to believe in God, and that a truly religious novel must show this. *Ship of Fools* depicts a group of sinful people walking — or should I say cruising — in darkness, because they have forgotten how to love. More than that, it shows the *difficulty* of loving one's neighbor, the temptation of pride which blinds people to the need for compassion. It would not be easy for the passengers on the ship to learn how to love, to be compassionate. As well expect a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, one might say.

Well, there it is, after twenty years. I confess that I did not think it would ever appear. I could not understand why it should take any writer two decades to complete a novel. But after reading *Ship of Fools,* I begin to understand why. It was necessary to see the people aboard the ship in just the right way, or the story would collapse. There were so many traps and pitfalls — of sentimentality, over-simplification, didacticism; the temptation to be merely the virtuoso, merely the manipulator for the effect of manipulation. Miss Porter waited until she got it right. To me it is an almost flawless work of fiction, and more than that, a tremendously rich and moving book — the major novel of a writer who loves people and hates injustice, and who has crowned her career with an unforgettable masterpiece.

To Shairon

● **Dan Burt**

When the infant buds
Push winter's ivory fist
From the brown rosebush,
I cannot burst forth reborn,
Lacking the sun of your eyes.

The Owl

● Robert Lewis Weeks

West Virginia back country is wonderful in the summer, especially in the hills. The sun is hot and vivid; the nights are cool. When rain comes in the night and thunder rolls in the hills, a special sadness haunts the dark, and I go out to walk before the rain and watch the lightning snag the range beyond.

In the hot afternoon sun I walk along the shade of the flowering bushes and under the gnarled apple trees on the hillside. I walk in a circle around the hill. The bushes and trees stand as a margin to the broad lawn so the hill sticks up like the top of an acorn. One side of the knoll is cool, and there I cut away from the circle and go down the washed-out, clay-gutted road to the valley. All this is great: it is quiet and real in a way that a classroom is not.

I teach poetry in a college classroom over ten months a year. Toward the end of the summer term, which I can never afford to skip, I grow nervous and dizzy and weak. I teach all day without notes unorganized and undisciplined classes. I can't teach in any other way: I haven't the patience to sit down and prepare Lectures. If I could, I couldn't use them. I would drive myself out of the room. I try to make a poem come to life with some interior meaning — whatever it has. I can't do this in any other way than by wrapping my entrails around it. It leaves me dizzy and weak. August in West Virginia restores my nerves for almost ten months again — allowing some little rejuvenation for Christmas and a week's spring vacation. But not much. Anyway, I go to West Virginia in August.

I don't do much there. I read a little — getting ready for September. Sometimes I fish. Sometimes I write. Sometimes I go out to walk, to see things and hear, to bring myself gradually back to life. I listen to the land breathe around me.

I spend a lot of time listening. This year, the third or fourth night out, I heard a new voice — something dark — and I listened for a long time. I had never heard it before; it was almost tangible. High in the trees it came, a harsh wheezing with a sharp, almost vicious trail to it. It kept on late into the night. It came in pairs — alternate, one to one side of me and the other on the other as though in asthmatic answer. Several times the voices shifted higher or lower in the branches, perhaps from tree to tree, and then a low, frantic warble of a bird as though caught in a trap, then silence followed by the wheeze again, very near and nearer in the tree in front of me, no sound of movement; even the breeze had died, no silhouette in the moonlight. Only the moon passed perceptibly through the trees, shadowed over from time to time by a few clouds glowing around the edges.

Back in the direction of the house, only the moonlight on the windows as though each window were an eye

watching what it only could clearly see.

Only once had I seen owls, but not close — at dusk in back of the old Norman tower near my home. Imprinted on my mind was an image of huge black wings noiselessly swooping through a tree, and squirrels dashing over and under limbs as though the mystique were full of flying mirages of darkness, with no sound and everything madness.

My father said, "Owls."

So now in broad daylight, with the sun shining full in hot circuit on the newly mown lawn, I wanted to see an owl — still and close up, not a stuffed owl, but a real one with real convulsions in his claws and real hunger in his eyes, full-spread wings in strong, quiet force. But I also wanted to drive him away.

They came back several nights in a row at first, but never clearly enough for me to see them. I heard them and knew they were there, and knew by Peterson's *Guide to the Birds* what kind they were. But that did no good. I couldn't see them. Several times I found the wings of birds under the trees in the morning: I assumed that the owls had gotten them.

I got a miner's torch from a neighbor, but that did no good either. Flash it in one direction, the sound carried by the breeze came from a new direction — the owls were ubiquitous or omnipresent. I couldn't see them, and I couldn't drive them away.

My intentions weakened a little. I had to read for September, and there was a stretch of two or three days when they didn't come or at least I didn't hear them when I walked. Still with me when I walked, however, was the realization that I *might* see an owl. And I left the cabin sometimes when I heard the birds sharping in a frenzied warning, but it was always just at dusk, and the owls had already taken a vigil of some sort and I couldn't separate them from darkness.

The owls soon became to me just one owl, and I wanted to see him. And I wanted to drive him away once and for all, but only after I had seen him.

Then, almost as suddenly as I had heard the sound in the first place, and as unexpectedly, I saw again the sight that I had seen years before behind the Norman tower — the great wings in the trees against near-dusk in a noiseless whisk, great and black. But it was so near dark that I could see, when he landed, merely a half outline, and that lasted only for a minute or two before all was black.

I almost gave it up as impossible after that, but it was odd the way that bird occupied my mind. I did other things — I fished, I went to neighbors' farms for milk and eggs, I looked for wild berries. But always coming back up the clay road I glanced up at the trees thinking that somehow one day he would be sitting there looking down at me, as though he too was full of curiosity. No matter where I came from, what I had been doing, what poem had possession of my mind, the idea of owl crowded in on me. I scanned the trees night and day, and I never saw him. I moved my chair outside at dusk and sat with my elbows on my knees and my head cocked back until my neck was stiff. I watched every movement in the trees. But I never saw him.

One evening when he didn't come, I walked past the circle of trees down toward the woods beyond. I walked to the edge of the forest and turned

back and forth there for a long time. Then I heard him in the woods near a clearing close to an old mine shaft. I stood still in the crickets and high grass outside the pocket-like clearing and listened. *I would not go in there.*

Always and always I heard him in the trees at night after that, so I made up my mind that I must get rid of him. There were always the wings and feathers under the trees to remind me to do that.

I gathered a whole pocket full of rocks— just the right size. It took me hours, and I had five pounds or more in my pockets. I made myself a strong slingshot out of an inner tube and a hickory limb. In the dusk, I took my weapon and waited to hear him.

As I knew he would, he came again after dark — loud and clear and close.

I put the roundest, most perfect rock of all in the sling and waited patiently to pinpoint the sound. It came, finally, raspy and wheezy.

I pulled the sling back far enough to make the shot straight and hard and killing — no loft — and it sprang out of my fingers as though it were alive. I heard the rock — clip, clip, clip through the dark leaves — then a brief silence. Without a sound of movement, the wheeze came again, perhaps thirty feet to the left of where I shot.

I shot again — a good heavy rock. Again the wrong place. Nothing. Again the wheeze.

Over and over I shot. Always the clip, clip, clip, then nothing. Sometimes the bang of the rock against a limb, then the wheeze.

It was clearly ridiculous, idiotic — shooting in darkness at the sound of shadows and listening to the lonesome clip, clip, clip of the rocks falling through the trees — almost like a superstitious barbarian afraid of the gods which haunted the dark shadows of the night.

The fog began to settle over the valley, and I went into the house, resolved never to worry about the owl again.

When I turned off the lights, I sat for a long time to watch in the dark the fog fill up the valley and rise along the hill like smoke from a hundred campfires hanging low on a heavy night. The back window seat was best for this. I could see clear across to the mine road beyond the farms. The low hum of the mine fan came over the hills. To my back, by turning slightly, I could see through the whole house and out the window at the front end, the window there given a light by the single bulb hanging over the road to the dairy on the next hill east.

The fog gathered in rolls and billowing circles. The mine fan was drowsy.

In the midst of my foggy reverie, rising thoughts about the stillness of the earth, something jerked me straight up in my seat, and my hair bristled as though an unexpected hot hand had been laid on the back of my neck. I hardly knew what had startled me.

I sat up in a listening posture. I heard it again.

In the dark, inside the house, a sigh deep and sepulchral clenched my back and tingled my scalp.

I whirled around, still in the window seat.

In the far end of the house the sound stirred. I watched in the dark. Everything was quiet as though still waiting — even the hum of the mine fan faded. A sigh again, and finally a dark silhouette moved against the

window — just a silhouette — a sharp profile with a distinct aquiline nose and classical beard. Another sigh after it passed.

I was afraid — no doubt about that. I couldn't force myself to reach the distant wall and flash on the light.

I watched the silhouette make three passes between me and the window, and each time I heard the deep sigh.

Finally, in a rush of uncontrolled excitement, I leaped to the light switch and flooded the room.

There was nothing, nothing at all.

I turned on the lights all over the house. Nothing anywhere.

I took the miner's torch out into the yard and flashed it all around the circle of bushes and trees. But nothing stirred.

The only sound I heard the rest of the night was the voice of the owl in the tree nearest the house.

Poem

An atomic wreath or corona
for Julius the Emperor Caesar
to be sent to him
sojourning on Christmas Island
(or is it now Novaya Zemlya?)
with a notation,
to wit,
that it IS Mars, i.e., the Ides of.

Yet it's hard
to get
a thing like this
started;
Clotho, Lachesis & Atropos
do it much better,
and swifter.

When
then when
When the One who

When I kneel
(let us say)
before the absurdity of bread
or for that matter
lift a hand towards a cup of common red wine
or make some similar gesture,

the whole of creation
(laughter)
  descends
    in a storm of flowers
  (more laughter).

Chrysanthemums know all this, and have said so,
  folded deep in November
  (see their account books kept at Hiroshima).

* *

Meanwhile,
  not too far away,
  though in a different dimension,
clouds gather
and
though only the unencumbered
    like, for example, the Bridegroom
        or midgardian wild geese
feel the infinitesimal tremor
singing its way in the blood & under the water;

the earth stiffens
and the Rock contracts,
oxen fret in the stalls of the mind;
ever so lightly hollies darken towards death,
ever so slightly pillars of sea caves tilt askew,
& many believe the boat of Minos is ready.

* *

Anyway,
Today glaciers in Greenland
      and the ghosts of their kindred in Canada
      stir in their sleep
  recalling,
  I mean dreaming of future
      indeed yes imminent
          dominion.
              Selah.
              SLAVA.

• William Kinter

Contributors

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